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ABSTRACT

As vital tools for adult education practitioners, reviews of books about practice should contain an appropriate balance between description and analysis. The following nine tips may be helpful when writing such a book review: (1) read the book carefully; (2) examine other reviews that have appeared in various publications to gauge the structure desired and target audiences addressed; (3) while reviewing a book, avoid reading other reviews of the same book; (4) describe the book's content sufficiently; (5) address the book's strengths and weaknesses; (6) look for writing style, organization, purpose, and substance; (7) give an overall assessment; (8) revise the review; and (9) be fair and thoughtful.(JD)

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TECHNíQUES

Tips for the Practitioner on Writing Book Reviews

by Ralph G. Brockett, Assistant Professor, Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana

Keeping up with professional literature is an almost impossible task. Most of us, regardless of the setting in which we practice, do not have the time to carefully read and digest the majority of books published in a given year. Thus, the book review becomes a vital tool for the adult education practitioner and those who can master the technique of book reviewing are in a position to provide a most valuable service to other practitioners. Professors are not the only individuals who can offer useful book reviews. In fact, the practitioner may often be the most appropriate person to review books about practice.

Jerold Apps has stated that "a book review is much more than a book report." In developing a book review, one needs to provide an appropriate balance between description and analysis. In other words, it is the job of the reviewer to both describe the main points of the book *and* to offer a critical analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the work. The purpose of a book review is to provide the reader with information so that he or she can make a decision about whether to read the book itself. The following tips may be helpful to the practitioner when writing a book review.

1. Read the book carefully. It is not enough to merely skim sections of the book. In fact, it is often wise to read the book more than once. Take notes the first time through; this can make it easier to refer back to those portions of the book that had special impact during the initial reading.

2. Examine book reviews that have appeared in various publications. Some journals prefer reviews that are short and somewhat direct while others seek a more detailed, scholarly review. When writing the review, be sure to bear in mind the background of the audience for the publication to which your review is targeted.

3. Try to avoid the temptation to read other reviews of the book that you are currently reviewing. It can be easy to let other viewpoints color your impressions. Besides, it is interesting to be able to "compare notes" with other reviewers *after* your own review is complete.

4. Describe the content of the book in enough detail so that the reader is informed of the major points covered but don't steal the author's thunder by giving a "blow-by-blow" account. Remember, the review is not intended to replace the book; rather, it is a tool that readers can use in making an informed decision about whether to pursue the book further.

5. When critiquing a book, address both its major strengths *and* weaknesses. Don't assume that because the author is an expert in the field, the book is above criticism. At the same time, don't feel obligated to find flaws where they don't exist. In other words, read the book with an open mind and offer both praise and criticism when appropriate.

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HOW TO USE TECHNIQUES

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6. Some things to look for when reviewing a book include the following:

A. *WRITING STYLE*—Is the book written in an appropriate style for the intended target audience?

B. *ORGANIZATION*—Does the book flow smoothly between paragraphs, sections, and chapters? Do ideas build on one another?

C. *PURPOSE*—Does the book achieve its purpose as stated in the introduction or preface?

D. *SUBSTANCE*—Is the book a comprehensive treatment of the topic? To what extent have major theories, research, issues, or practices related to the topic been included? If the book is a report of original research, are the methodology and procedures appropriate?

7. In most instances, you should conclude your review with an overall assessment of the book. How well did it achieve its primary purpose(s)? For whom would you recommend the book?

8. After developing your first draft, go back and revise your review. Try to omit any unnecessary words or phrases. In general, try to tighten up the review. Some writers find that several drafts are necessary. Others are comfortable with two or three drafts. There are no firm guidelines; probably the best guide is knowledge of your own approach to writing.

9. Book reviewing is an important responsibility that should not be taken lightly. If published, your review is likely to influence a large number of people; therefore, it is crucial that the review be both fair and thoughtful. This does not mean that you should hold back on criticism when appropriate. It *does* mean, however, that you need to do a responsible and thorough job in describing the book, stating what you like and dislike about it and why.

Book reviewing is one of the most effective ways for a new author to be published. More important, the practitioner who reviews the books is providing a valuable service to the field. Indeed, book reviewing is a technique well worth mastering.

Resources

Apps, J. (1982). *Improving your writing skills.* Chicago: Follett.
Kamerman, S.E. (1978). *Book reviewing.* Boston: The Writer, Inc.